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SUBJECT: HEALTH MINISTER ON INTERNET PHARMACIES: TAKE TWO
PREVIOUS STATEMENTS AND CALL ME IN A FEW WEEKS

REF: OTTAWA 0525 (CANADA SEEKS REGULATORY

PRESCRIPTION FOR INTERNET PHARMACIES)

11. Summary: At yesterday's meeting of the House Committee on Health, Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh stated that he did not wish to destroy the internet pharmacy industry, but that he was committed to addressing potential drug shortages in Canada and the underlying "ethical questions" of doctors cosigning prescriptions without seeing the patients in question. Despite barbed questioning from committee members who pointed out that he first made statements against the internet pharmacy trade in November 2004, Minister Dosanjh provided no new insight into the GOC's likely response to the internet pharmacy trade, stating only that he would present a selection of his already-public options to the cabinet in the next few weeks. Pharmacy regulation in Canada, however, is primarily the responsibility of the provinces, and therefore any GOC action may have limited immediate effect. End Summary.

12. Minister Dosanjh had been invited to testify to the committee specifically on the internet pharmacy issue, but instead used his presentation time to focus on other issues such as ministry transparency and Health Canada's new Adverse Drug Reaction database. In fact, a committee member asked (as an ostensible point of order) whether Dosanjh knew why he had been asked to testify. The hearing was interrupted by a number of such testy interchanges, particularly between Minister Dosanjh and Conservative member Steven Fletcher. Minister Dosanjh tried to highlight recent progress in his ministry, but these attempts were rebuffed by members who complained that the above-mentioned database was hard to use and wait-times for medical treatments are too long (comment: benchmarks for appropriate wait times aren't expected till December, and provinces won't be required to report progress until 2007; Brenda Chamberlain, a member of Dosanjh's own Liberal party, argued heatedly that even then the federal government would not have strong enforcement options. End comment.)

13. On the topic of internet pharmacies, Dosanjh received barbed questions from both sides, with some members pushing for action after over six months of promises from Dosanjh and other members calling on Dosanjh to protect the internet pharmacy industry. Dosanjh restated the options he has previously listed for dealing with the internet pharmacy trade (banning cosigning, controlling exports through a list of not-for-export drugs or through export licenses, and requirements that purchasers be physically present in Canada. See Ottawa 0525) Dosanjh also mentioned the possibility of banning bulk exports, an option that is viewed positively by many in Canada because it would allow the internet pharmacy industry to continue as it has, while countering any possible U.S. federal or state importation program. Dosanjh said that he hoped to provide these options to a cabinet meeting in upcoming weeks, but averred that he would "not be rushed," which did little to appease Quebecois members whose ridings include pharmaceutical companies as constituents (comment: on the other hand, a western member with internet pharmacy constituents advocated many more years of monitoring the industry before taking action). For those members urging rapid action, much of the concern over the delay seemed to center around the idea that reacting to any U.S. legislation would be difficult once Parliament is recessed; Minister Dosanjh countered that the GOC could take relatively rapid action under the Export Control Act, but that this would only be a temporary fix. In fact, any GOC action may have limited effectiveness since, as we have noted before (ref Ottawa 0525), pharmacy regulation is primarily the responsibility of the provinces and a number of provinces are protective of their internet pharmacy industries.

14. Minister Dosanjh resisted a fellow westerner's attempt to place the issue into the context of an intra-Canadian regional trade dispute (with primarily-western internet pharmacies ranged against primarily-eastern pharmaceutical companies.) Instead, Minister Dosanjh reiterated that his concern is for security of the Canadian drug supply and the Canadian drug pricing regime. Minister Dosanjh claimed that U.S. politicians fall into two camps on this issue: one camp hoping to "smash the pricing regime in Canada" and the other camp hoping to bring a similar pricing regime to the United

States. In response, Minister Dosanjh reiterated that he is firmly committed to protecting the pricing regime in Canada and the drug supply for Canadians, but that cabinet confidentiality meant that he couldn't tell the committee how

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he planned to do that.

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